



# higher education & training

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Department:  
Higher Education and Training  
**REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

## **The Higher Education and Training Landscape: Government's Transformation Agenda**

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Distinguished Guests and Comrades.

To gain a deep understanding of the South African economy, the labour movement and the South African labour market, it is necessary to examine more closely into our history than most people usually do. Such a study will reveal that skills development, like nearly all other significant socio-economic processes, has been profoundly shaped by the economic trajectory of colonialism and apartheid – that is, by classical colonialism and by colonialism of a special type.

Eighteen years have passed since we took control of the South African government and many changes have been made. We have experienced both successes and disappointments, all of which we need to analyse carefully and learn from. But the fabric of our society has also been shaped by deep-rooted and often traumatic economic, social and political processes going back over 350 years. The skills profile of SA has been shaped particularly by the economic development trajectory of the past 150 years since the discovery of diamonds and gold which set South Africa on a path of capitalist industrialisation.

From the beginning, the mining industry was labour intensive, using large numbers of black workers who had been forced to become migrant workers to earn money for the poll taxes which were designed to force peasants into wage labour. Because of the colonial context, political power was largely in the hands of whites, especially the white mining capitalists and landowners. In order to maintain their privileged position, these groups were forced to make an alliance with white workers, who were given a monopoly over artisanal skills by means of the job reservation laws. The white working class was able to protect its relatively privileged position for almost a century, using its two main weapons: firstly, the vote, and secondly, their near monopoly over industrial, mining and commercial skills.

Since Africans were not allowed to do skilled work, they were also prevented from getting the kind of education or training which would prepare them for such work. So we see that skills development in South Africa was shaped by colonialism and apartheid. Coloured and Indian workers were also kept in a subordinate position but were given limited

legal and economic 'privileges' in order to discourage their solidarity with Africans.

The result of this type of dispensation was that the workforce that developed in this country included a small elite of managers and professionals, a somewhat bigger group of largely white, skilled workers and a mass of unskilled, mostly black, workers. The latter were kept in subjugation through both political repression as well as by laws preventing them from gaining the education or the skills to compete on the basis of equality with whites. This pattern of the labour market has come to be so totally accepted and internalised by SA capitalism – and often even by ourselves – that we don't realise how abnormal it is. In the same way that we defeated political oppression, so we now must overcome the oppression that is born of a deficit of education and of skills. In other words, to break with apartheid partly means to break decisively with the old apartheid distribution of skills. As the ANC speaks about the second phase of our transition, radical restructuring and reshaping of the skills landscape and profile of our country should very much be part of this second phase.

What does this mean for the government and for the trade union movement?

For the government it means a major effort to ensure that education and skills development are available to all, especially to those who were previously deprived and those who are still disadvantaged for any reason. Above all, government must make sure that opportunities are made available to all sectors of the African people, to other blacks, women, the disabled, people in rural areas and those affected by HIV/AIDS. In

particular government needs to provide opportunities to the working class and the poor and all those who are victims of poverty and unemployment.

In the Department of Higher Education and Training, we have developed a strategy to tackle the challenges that face us. This strategy is currently encapsulated in our Green Paper on Post School Education; it is being refined on the basis of public comment and will be expressed as official government policy in a White Paper.

The post-school system, as we have envisaged it, includes the universities, the colleges (including FET colleges), adult education centres, the levy-grant institutions (i.e. the SETAs and the National Skills Fund) as well as regulatory institutions like SAQA, the CHE, Umalusi and the QCTO. We plan to connect these institutions in a single, integrated, coherent and well articulated post-school system. We also plan to add to them through the establishment of a new institutional type which we are provisionally calling Community Education and Training Colleges which will provide a range of training opportunities that the existing institutions are not geared to providing.

All institutions in the post school system must cooperate with each other for the mutual benefit of all. And there must be no dead-ends: all qualifications must be part of a bigger system so that people completing any programme will always have pathways open to them to go on to higher levels of study. Particularly important in our circumstances is the development of effective systems for the recognition of prior learning (RPL). This is because black workers have often done much skilled work informally, without the recognition that leads to higher levels of pay. This situation allows

employers to intensify the exploitation of workers in this position. This is why we are taking this issue of RPL very seriously and are working on a proper RPL system. As part of our RPL policy development process, we are now also developing and implementing – together with unions and employers – a single national sustainable RPL system for artisan aides and engineering assistants.

To overcome the education and skills deficit that is our legacy from apartheid, we are planning to massively expand access to post school education and training. We are doing this by expanding places in universities, colleges and other post-school institutions as well as making more funding to progressively introduce free education for the poor to undergraduate level. In the past three years, loans and bursaries available to poor students have been expanded substantially. Funding grew from R2.375 billion in 2008 to R6 billion in 2011 and we expect the total amount to continue to grow. From last year we have effectively introduced free education for poor student in the FET colleges. College students who would normally have qualified for a NSFAS loan now no longer have to pay fees at all and in most cases also get their accommodation or transport subsidized.

Over the next 18 years, we expect to expand university places by two thirds over the next 18 years and to expand enrolments at FET colleges and other post-school institutions to 4 million, an expansion of approximately 500%. At the same time we have already taken measures to improve the quality of the education offered in our institutions and the focus on quality improvement will become a permanent feature of our education system. The main beneficiaries of both the expansion and improved quality of post

school education will be the working class as well as the urban and rural poor.

An important feature of our skills development policies is our emphasis on expanding workplace-based training opportunities to complement classroom-based education. Many programmes require learners to have experience in workshops as well as in workplaces in order to qualify. Workplaces which are prepared to accept learners are often in short supply and one of our most important thrusts is ensuring that more employers provide opportunities for apprentices, learner, interns, cadets, articulated clerks, etc. The numbers of new artisan learners (i.e. those in apprenticeships or learnerships) has now started to increase again after a long decline from the mid-1980s. The numbers of people passing their trade tests to qualify as artisans has more than doubled in the last four years, from 6 030 in 2007/08 to 13 168 in 2011/12. The continued growth in these numbers is essential if the country is to successfully undertake the planned strategic infrastructure projects and all the peripheral industries which will grow to complement them: suppliers, users and service providers of various kinds.

Our government has experienced a number of successes, but it has also had its share of false starts. An example of such a false start, I believe, is the levy-grant system, comprising the SETAs and the NSF. This system provides valuable resources for skills development. But these institutions have been left to be more or less independent and unaccountable. Not enough effort has been put into making them answerable for their actions and their spending. The result has been a large waste of resources;

billions of rand have been spent with little to show in the way of valuable and concrete skills development initiatives.

Another big mistakes we made were to give insufficient attention to the FET colleges and to keep them largely marginalised in the education and training system. This unfortunate attitude to the development of mid-level vocational skills that this reflects, is also evident in the way we allowed the apprenticeship system to decline. With the assistance of our entire society, and especially of the working class, we must continue to identify weaknesses and failures as they arise and to tackle them. This is essential because the cost of failure to develop an effective education and training system will be very large for both our people and our economy.

Now, what do the skills challenges mean for the trade union movement? They mean, above all, that the trade unions must put skills development at the heart of their strategies in engaging with employers and with government and also for engaging with their members. Skills are a weapon in the hands of workers; a skilled working class is a stronger working class. Skilled workers cannot be easily be replaced and their work cannot be easily outsourced.

Skills are at the heart of a modern economy; the days when capitalism needed large numbers of unskilled workers are behind us. Nowadays, unskilled manual work is increasingly being done by machines, so the workers who can use the machines to produce goods and services and those who can create new machines and develop new production processes are the indispensable ones. Today, even to establish a small business or an successful cooperative enterprise, needs knowledge and

skills that were not necessary 50 or 100 years ago. A worker who is retrenched but has skills has a better chance to find another way of making a sustainable living for him- or herself.

The SETA's, as I said, are important institutions that control funding for education and training of the working class. Worker representatives make up half the members of the boards who are not Ministerial appointees – and until recently made up a full 50% of the SETA boards. I don't think that we can say that the worker representatives have always been effective. Unions have often sent relatively junior or inexperienced representatives to the SETA boards and they have not given them clear mandates or held them accountable for their performance. One doubts even if there have been regular report backs to the union leadership or membership. SETA boards as a whole – not only, it must be said, the worker representatives – have not been successful at preventing the kind of misuse of funds which has been so widespread. In some cases the boards or individual board members have themselves been involved in corrupt activities.

We must admit that the government has been responsible for some major misjudgements, poorly designed policies and poor implementation strategies with regard to the SETAs. But at the same time we must recognise that the trade union movement has neglected its responsibilities with regard to the SETAs, thus making it also complicit in a decade of squandering of public money. It is now time to tackle the weaknesses and overcome the challenges we face.

On our part as government we have introduced some significant measures to intervene in the functioning and responsiveness of the SETAs to the

national skills development agenda. This includes the restructuring of the SETA boards, aligning their work closer to the FET colleges, and strengthening relations with employers. We also require SETAs to open offices in FET colleges, townships and rural areas so that they are closer to the people. We expect the labour movement to be more visible in these efforts.

At the root of the problem, I think, is that Cosatu has not really developed a comprehensive skills strategy. Such a strategy needs to be developed for each union, for each economic sector and for national engagements. It should guide unions' negotiating strategies at all these levels. Government education and skills policy should be strongly influenced by well informed unions that engage on an ongoing basis with skills issues at the workplace, in the SETAs and in their interaction with employers at all levels. Employers should be under constant pressure to assist with building the skills of workers because raising the educational and skills levels of workers is key to fundamentally transforming the workplace.

My Ministry is always willing to engage with unions and especially with COSATU on education and training issues so that together we can tackle the skills needs of our people and, especially, of our working class.

What I said earlier has demonstrated that skills development can be a revolutionary strategy. It can help to reverse the skewed skills profile of the South African workforce that was forced on us by successive white supremacist governments. It is also the key to strengthening the bargaining power of workers. Socialism will only ever be a dream – or at most a

temporary victory – if the working class does not possess the skills essential to running a modern national economy.

Forward to the skills revolution!